

Godard's Science

Jean Douchet

ABSTRACT

In a lecture held at the Cinémathèque Suisse, Jean-Luc Godard reflects on the relationship between the Cinémathèques and his own work on the history of cinema. In this way, the question regarding programming may be formulated as follows: what images to compare? In his quest to continue the work initiated by André Bazin on the ontology of cinema, Godard seems to have opted for a 'de-structuring' principle, or a breaking down the mechanism of cinema into atoms, a principle derived from previous enquiries found in the theories of montage of film-makers such as Dziga Vertov or Sergei Eisenstein. For Godard, it is the succession of discontinuous instants that creates cinema. The novelty resides in the fact that this method would lead Godard to work on the physics of cinema, replacing the concept of 'evolution' for that of 'fractioning', and the 'instant' for the relativity of space and time. This way of finding a form appropriate to the study of the history of cinema through montage finds a parallel in the practice of film programming as a form of comparative cinema.

KEYWORDS

Jean-Luc Godard, Cinémathèque Suisse, Soviet montage, comparative cinema, discontinuous montage, film physics, space-time relativity, principle of fragmentation of images.

What I find most striking about Jean-Luc Godard's 1979 lecture at the Cinémathèque Suisse de Lausanne¹, Switzerland on film programming, is not only his focus on the comparison between images but the images he compares. The interest resides in juxtaposing, as he puts it, an image of an immortal work of the history of cinema with another image of a less well-known film, perhaps even a film that Godard has not even seen himself. Why this relationship in particular? Godard wanted to continue André Bazin's enquiry on the question 'What is cinema?'. How so? By making all the well-codified structures of cinema explode and, from the resulting elements, from those atoms, finding all the possibilities of cinema.

In a certain way, Jean-Luc Godard is someone who can only create by destroying, or 'de-structuring', if you like. His enquiry departs from well formed elements, belonging to the greatest films as well as the tiniest nullities. He was as interested in the construction of a shot or a *raccord* in Serguéi Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov – two film-makers that obsessed him – as in the professional abilities of a bad film-maker. Why bringing together two absurd shots? Simply because why shouldn't we get something out of them? Certain things are so bad that they can give place to something else.

Godard's strength is to have taken apart the whole cinematographic system and, in particular – in spirit, mind and, finally, in acts – the constitution of cinema itself: to take cinema as an optical and photographic device, which registers changes in light on a strip of film. Consider *The Little Soldier* (*Le Petit soldat*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1963): photography is truth; film, truth 24-times per second. Film is celluloid – it is onto a strip

of film that those 24 images per second are photographed. Once set in motion by a motor, the still images will generate another movement, that is, the illusion of movement. But the film itself is composed of 24 still images per second, each of them separated from the previous and the next one by a small barrier, a small band. Such observation brings Godard to state that montage is the most fundamental element within the whole cinematographic apparatus; it is the nucleus of the constitution of cinema itself. Cinema is not about continuity, or the illusion created by the mechanical construction of a continuous movement; it is the succession of discontinuous moments and instants that creates cinema.

This concept radically changes the whole conception of cinema. It's not that it hadn't been thought of before. From D. W. Griffith to Soviet film-makers, many had previously thought about this question before Godard. But they didn't come up with a concrete idea on what to do with this knowledge. How to arrive to a purely physical phenomenon, how to work with the physicality of cinema – how to work on the physical through physics. If Godard is such an important figure, it is because he was the first film-maker to become aware of his own time: the twentieth-century. Other art forms had previously acquired that consciousness. Painting, literature, even music, had rapidly taken on board the theories of modern scientific knowledge. Film, on the other hand, perpetuated what it had learned over the last years of the previous century. Its conception of continuity, dramaturgy, narrative, etc. all come from the nineteenth-century. To remain oblivious to the fact that cinema belonged to the same age as the theory of relativity and quantum physics

1. This lecture stemmed out from the invitation that Freddy Buache extended to Jean-Luc Godard to participate in a debate held at the Cinémathèque Suisse, alongside Buache himself, Ivor Montagu and Jean Mitry. The subject that Godard was asked to address was the relationship between the work being done by the Cinémathèques and Godard's own conception of the formal *mise en scène* of the history of cinema. This symposium took place at the end of the Annual Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du

Film (FIAF), held from 30 May until 1 June 1979 at the Cinémathèque Suisse de Lausanne on the occasion of the anniversary of the congress at La Sarranz in 1929. Shortly after, the Cinémathèque Suisse published a transcription of the lecture – unsigned and interrupted before its conclusion – in its magazine *Travelling* (Lausanne), n° 56-57, 1980, pp. 119-136. However, the version of the transcription that I refer to is the one quoted in the bibliography below.

was to make a huge mistake on what we could do with cinema and what cinema could contribute to the twentieth century. From that point onwards, cinema will only work with discontinuity and permanent rupture. Through montage, and under this directing principle, all the elements of cinema begin to play a role in his work.

Since continuity does no longer exist, there can no longer be a dominant discourse. Just as in quantum physics, all the elements become disperse, and no idea of perseverance ensues, but rather the idea of the lack thereof. What emerges is the consciousness of a world that no longer has a single line. It is necessary to work on diverse and diverging lines. This is precisely what Godard has done, on the basis of cinema itself as he understands it, that is, of montage. The first line is the image band; the second, the words; the third, sounds and noise; the fourth, the music, etc. When these are constant lines, they progress at the same time and they develop in a parallel and synchronised manner; however, after realising that these are separate lines, there is no reason – and this is another theory, what we could call ‘the perseverance theory’ – why sound should be used to qualify the image, as it had been the case for so long.

Hence a new conception of cinema is born, one that can only understand the relationship amongst these lines as one of independence: each line has its freedom and is considered on equal terms in relation to the others. We may ‘play’ with them, allow one to suddenly dominate the other one... Multiple facets that prevent a progressive construction. Evolution no longer exists, only the fractioning of a series of instants. Not even instants: the relativity of time and space can also be contested. Godard said: ‘I am not an artist, it is the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (National Centre of Scientific Research) that should pay me.’ Godard is a scientist. He is an artist, certainly, but a fabulous artist who applies the current situation of science to an instrument, cinema, more propitious to his eyes than any other to be fully modern.

To a great extent, this shift in mentality places all previous cinema in a bubble. Even if classical cinema continued and perpetuated the nineteenth-century – and hence its power since it enabled the development, from a passed century, of a number of things that hadn’t had the opportunity to be yet developed – when looking at classical cinema under a new lens, that is, modern science, one cannot work with it in the same way. And yet, cinema was itself the bearer of its fundamental truth – those 24 elements per second.

Cinema, or the way of conceiving of cinema, radically changed from this point onwards and, even after Godard, it will continue to change. No one can dare to do what Godard does – he is unique – but one may talk about an expansive wave. Even if only at the level of the research on space and time, it is unstoppable. Cinema works in an identical and permanent space – a frame, a canvas with a certain format that remains unchanged from the first to the last image that in it acquires a form. But it is an identical being without continuity. An aleatory distribution that doesn’t bear benefits, but spells. Hence its interest and its potential.

Given the exploitation of a completely fragmented world, one can no longer make classical cinema or see it in the same way, and one ends up by putting everything into an envelope. It may still be admired, just as the Parthenon or Diego Velázquez’s paintings may still be admired. There is no reason to stop doing so. But such perfect works were perfect in relation to their own time, they have expressed their era and are linked to the philosophical and scientific thought of their own time, but they do not correspond to the present. Today we must break away from them. But in fact we are going even further. We are breaking with the acquired conception of the universe at large, and contesting civilisation itself. Godard is a great film-maker of the decadence. For him, one civilisation died, and another one needs to be born. And this new civilisation must feed itself from the preceding one, but without reproducing it: it must transform it into something else.

Godard is not wrong about the journals in his lecture either². Film criticism has not even tried to do that job, satisfied as it is to work on the 'I like it/I don't' dichotomy, which never had any interest at all. Even when confronted to classical cinema, there were many few of us who worked on really thinking through that cinema. At that time, there was a criticism: at a small-scale, the task was done. But very few critics may rise at the occasion of the work that this would require now, of the reflection that it would require. This is what Godard himself

says. Given its basic de-structuring, today cinema is reduced to an image, and not only a succession of images – since this is still the case – but to a confrontation of images, both visual and aural. What will his 3-D work, *Adieu au langage* (Jean-Luc Godard, *Farewell to Language*, 2013)? If the sense of smell existed in cinema, Godard would have used it. To explore the dialogue amongst the plots of cinema. Image's nature is under constant transformation. An image that doesn't bear in itself another image is only an image, alone. ●

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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JEAN DOUCHET

Jean Douchet studied Philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he specialised in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Daniel Lagache and Étienne Souriau. He is a film critic and historian and has been a professor at the Université de Vincennes since 1969. Later, he also taught at the Université de Jussieu and Université de Nantes. Between 1976 and 79 he was Director of Studies at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC), a professor of film history, script and film analysis at La Femis (École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers de l'Image et du Son) and former President of the

Collège d'Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique, all in Paris. In 1957 he begins to write for *Cahiers du cinéma* and the magazine *Art* (until 1962). Amongst many other books, he has published *Alfred Hitchcock* (*Cahiers du cinéma*, 1967), *L'Art d'aimer* (*Cahiers du cinéma*, 1987), *Gertrud de Carl Th. Dreyer* (Yellow Now, 1988), *La Modernité cinématographique en question. Le Cinéma muet des années parlantes* (Cinémathèque Française, 1992), *Nouvelle vague* (Cinémathèque Française/Hazan, 1998) and *La DVDéothèque de Jean Douchet* (*Cahiers du cinéma*, 2006).

2. I quote below some excerpts from the lecture, not compiled according to a chronological order but to my own 'montage', hoping that the words brought here together acquire a new meaning: 'For me, the history of cinema will be the history of two conspiracies. The first one: the conspiracy of the talkie against silent film, since the birth of the latter. Second conspiracy: the words, that could have helped silent film to... A plot against the fact that no history will be written... we will find a means of preventing history to be told – otherwise it would be too powerful, also, since when one learns to tell one's own history, then, there is... I don't know... the world changes! And I ask myself whether people working at the

Cinémathèques are at all interested in asking..., if there are other people who are also concerned with this aspect, the aspect of film production related to its conservation. Conservations, well, things are more or less conserved, but what is the interest in conserving impeccably since we see that, after all, what is it that is conserved? An image! What is interesting is to conserve the relationship between two images. It is not so important to conserve a film, as long as we conserve three stills of a film by Vertov and three stills of a film by Eisenstein, we would know what happened: that would be the role of magazines.'